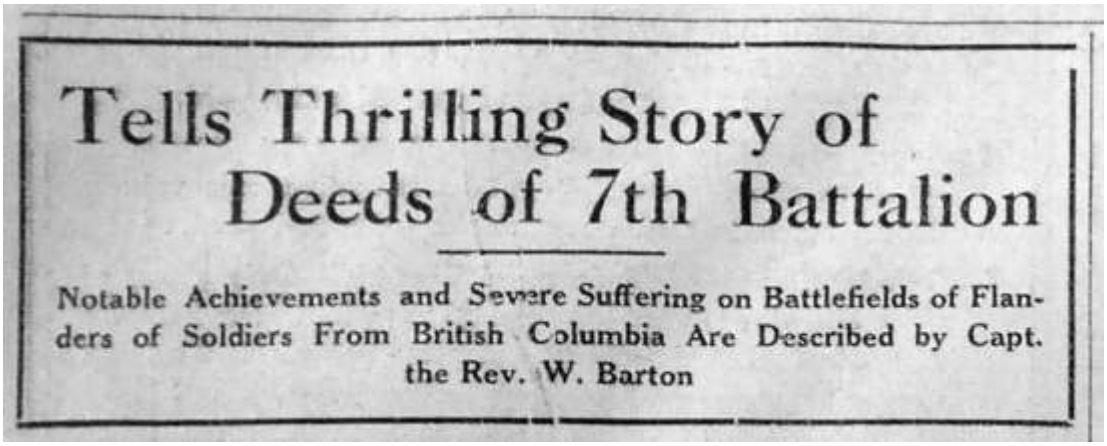


Tells Thrilling Story of Deeds of 7th Battalion

Notable Achievements and Severe Suffering on Battlefields of Flanders of Soldiers From British Columbia Are Described by Capt. the Rev. W. Barton

TELLS THRILLING STORY OF DEEDS OF 7TH BATTALION – Daily Colonist 29 Aug 1915

Notable Achievements and Severe Suffering on Battlefields of Flanders of Soldiers From British Columbia Are Described by Capt. the Rev. W. Barton

(By Rev. Wm. Barton, Chaplain)

The 1st British Columbia Regiment early in its career, because of its component parts – units from Fusiliers and Rifles – received the name "Rifleliers" in the marching song composed by the late Capt. R. V. Harvey, when en route to Valcartier. The word was coined for the refrain: "The boys who come from the setting sun, the B.C. Rifleliers."

The various regiments that supplied volunteers for the battalion were the 6th D.C.O. Rifles, 11th Irish Rifles, New Westminsters, 88th Victoria Fusiliers, New Westminster Fusiliers, Rocky Mountain Rangers and the Kootenay Contingent.

After the battle of Keerselaere-Gravenstafle-St. Julien, the battalion was reinforced by a draft from the 2nd B.C.R.

Nothing of note marked their stay at Valcartier and their voyage across the Atlantic on their way to England, except that they received special words of commendation from H.R.H. the Duke of Connaught, General Alderson, and at the first review by His Majesty, King George V. At the second review by His Majesty, only the King's message was sent to the 1st Canadian division. The same might be said of the inspection at the front by Sir John French and Sir H. Smith-Dorrien.

The spirit of patriotism which had led these splendid lads to volunteer in this time of their country's need had, in many instances, previously led them to British Columbia to help develop the wonderful resources of the Province, which contains unique opportunities for the man with pluck and initiative, and whoever refuses to acknowledge himself as beaten.

It was this spirit that carried him through the tedious, wet, interminable mud of Salisbury Plains. "Are we downhearted? No! No! No!" was their cry. It was that unconquerable spirit that held them when the French were demoralized on their left, through the Germans' devilish use of gas that killed and agonized thousands and left the left flank of the Canadian Division open to an enveloping flank attack.

It was this unbreakable spirit that held them hour by hour, when shrapnel and high explosive rained like a good old British Columbia rain, both up and down, all sides at once, at Festubert. It was the noble spirit of British Columbia brotherhood, that our early pioneers have given to mark the western spirit, that held them as they collected from the front of their trenches at Givenchy, with the

enemy trenches from 40 to 80 yards away, the wounded who had been lying out through chill night and blazing sun for 48 and 72 hours, to hurry them to hospital and to give reverent burial to a large number of dead comrades of another brigade.

It has been long recognized that this is and has been the spirit of the true Canadian, whether by birth or residence. In this terrible war, it is the common possession of the B.E.F., but because it is so grandly developed in our British Columbia boys, we believe it enables them to be steadfast and true to their God, their King, and their country, and show that their motto, "Splendor Sine Occasu," is safe in their care.

First Time in Trenches

In the story of the 1st B.C.R., or 7th Canadian Battalion, it is only necessary to refer to the particular events which go to make their history. In February, after a short rest at Strazeele, early in the morning they assembled in a field and the O.C., Col. Hart-McHarg, called the battalion to attention – it was on a Sunday morning – and orders had been received that the brigade would march to Ploegsteert, and there would go into the trenches with an English brigade for instructional purposes.

Having come to attention, the chaplain called on the battalion to join in the Lord's Prayer. He then recited the Collect in time of War, and pronounced the benediction.

It was the stage of the journey that took them to the actual scene of war – the mysterious place known as The Front. With prayer and blessing they proceeded to meet its terror, hardships and undying glory.

"Plug Street" in February! The place of desolation! But oh, the long, hard, "pave" road that had to be trodden before you got there! Fifteen long, weary hours getting there, with some hard-hearted monster, who persisted in going on and on, at the head of the column – a monster like some gigantic tadpole, all head and no feet. Else he would long time rest by the estaminet, where consolation for blisters could be obtained.

The 1st British Columbia got there with a surprisingly small number of "fallen outs." Into the trench they marched the next night and partook of the joys of the "tamboo" and monotony of endurance. Work parties all night – digging trenches – pumping water out – putting up wire entanglements – going out on listening patrols.

Not a day went by without its casualty in death and wounds. War with its awful cruelty was the first lesson learned.

After a short experience at Plug Street, the brigade's next experience in the trenches was at Fleurbaix. A line of trenches was taken over from a British division. The battalion at this time was fully organized. Lt.-Col. W. Hart-McHarg, O.C.; Major V.W. Odlum, second in command; Major Moberley, O.C. No. 1 Company; Major Rigby, No. 2 Company; Captain Cooper, No. 3 Company; and Major Byng-Hall of No. 4 Company.

The headquarters in the trenches were at La Boutillaire convent. The foundations and convent walls alone existed at this time, the rest was battered down by many shells. The bricks of which it had been substantially built had long ago been used to pave trenches, build parapets and fill thousands of sandbags.

The battle of Neuve Chapelle was fought whilst the division held these trenches. The battalion was in the front line of trenches and at the word of command opened a steady fire on the enemy trenches. It prevented any reinforcements being sent from this position. From the terrific cannonade, which had continued from the early hours of the morning, all hands knew that a great battle was being fought. Never for an instant did our lads show signs of undue excitement, but as Sir Horace Smith-

Dorrien afterwards said: “From the time you went into the trenches I had experienced officers who watched you. Each report that came to me led me to think that, like my old command in South Africa, of which I was proud, I should be equally proud of you, for from the beginning you acted with the steadiness of veterans.”

All ranks gained much valuable experience during these weeks of preparation. All were anxious to move forward. The casualty list had grown, but as a rule was only looked upon as the fortune of war. They made our lads more anxious to come to grips with the foe and exact a heavy payment for the officers and men the sniper had picked off.

After Fleurbaix, rest and refitting at the town of Estaires, holy week and Easter were fitting preparation for what was to come. On from Estaires to Steenwoorde and then on April 13 moved near Ypres. Here the Canadian division took over a line of French trenches, as the B.E.F. was increasing in strength. The Canadian division had been in the Ypres salient just ten days when the Germans made their memorable attack on the Turco-Algerian division of the French army. As long as the world lasts no blot on the history of the German race will be remembered so absolutely degrading as their use of poisonous gas against their fellowmen. The wilful disregard of the Geneva Convention is as nothing to this inhuman device.

Before the battle commenced officers and men had begun to win honor before King and country. Lieut. Thorn, of No. 2 Company (11th Irish), performed the act of gallantry which is among those recommended for the King’s award. A French rocket had been misfired. After circling round it fell, burning furiously, in a box of 20 loaded hand-grenades. Mr. Thorn sang out, “Here’s my ticket for hell,” and springing forward picked the burning cartridge out of the box and extinguished it. His expression showed that he fully realized the dangerous situation he was in. His feat – for readiness of thought, quickness of action and fearlessness in danger, with noble spirit of self-sacrifice – is not often excelled.

The work of the battalion is perhaps best narrated and illustrated by the work of the individual officers. There were no spectacular charges, because when the attack commenced the battalion was in reserve billets. Col. Hart-McHarg was known for his thoroughness in everything he undertook or was called upon to perform. In years before this had won for him and Canada the King’s Prize at Bisley, and many another trophy at international and interprovincial ranges. In the legal profession this was also a very marked feature of his work, and won for him good success. As a soldier and battalion commander this thoroughness enabled him to hold his position and handle his men so well during that first tremendous onslaught. It was this desire to do everything that could be done that ended in his early death. With clear knowledge of the great danger entailed, he went forward to make a personal reconnaissance and in doing so was mortally wounded.

His trained sight, steady nerve and mental acumen, with his known and tried qualities as a soldier and commander, made his position very difficult to fill under any circumstances, but particularly so in a battle of such duration and over so much ground as the battle of Keerselaere-Grafenstafle-St. Julien was fought.

Since the mobilization of the battalion at Valcartier as the 1st B.C.R. there had always been a very happy spirit and readiness of co-operation amongst all the officers of the battalion. Often this led to results otherwise not attainable. In the midst of the stress of this terrible battle, when the command of the battalion suddenly fell upon the shoulders of Major Odlum, he knew he could absolutely rely and depend on every officer and man to back him up. The result speaks for itself. He fought his battalion effectually to the end. He needed an inflexible will to carry him though the long days and nights, which demanded unflagging vigilance. The spirit that refuses to accept defeat was there and in him.

Captain Harvey

In the most exposed position on Keerselaere was the left half of No. 3 Company, with Captain Harvey in command. Some day we shall hear further details of his gallantry and that of his second, Lieut. Herbert Bromley, who was wounded early in the fight, but refused to leave the trench. He had his wound dressed and continued with his men. Later he was killed. Capt. Harvey was dangerously wounded. When his wound was dressed his men carried him into a shell hole, and with his customary thoughtfulness, he thanked them, and said, "Now, you have done all you can for me, go back and help in the firing line, where you are needed." So they left him, and next thing we hear of him is, in captivity, and then of his death from his wound. Again the spirit that knew not defreat. His remarkable grasp upon detail work was of immense benefit to his company and his battalion.

When Col. McHarg received his wound there were with him Capt. Morrison of the C.R.E.'s No. 2 Company, and Major Odlum. After making the Colonel as comfortable as possible, at great personal risk, Major Odlum left him and made his way to headquarters to get the medical officer's help. The medical officer, Capt. Gibson at once went out to the Colonel under a very heavy fire, and dressed his wound, and then he succeeded in removing him to the shelter of a ditch and hedge. They had been lying in the hole made by a "Black Maria." They had to lie in the bottom of that ditch for over four hours, until it was dark enough for the stretcher-bearers to go out. This was safely accomplished under the medical officer's guidance, and the colonel was brought in to the dressing station. This is but one instance of the readiness of resource, coolness and cheerfulness in danger and exceptional powers of organization that Capt. Gibson, M.O., 1st B.C.R., has so frequently shown during the war.

Gallant Deeds

There cannot be a better adjutant than Capt. A.S. Gardiner, not one whose excellence of work was more marked. When the German attack was at its height and worst, one of our batteries ran out of shells. The horses in the limbers were killed, and the Germans were coming on fast. There was only one way to save the situation and that was to get shells to the guns somehow. Capt. Gardiner called for volunteers, and taking every available man, led them to the limbers. Each man as he came up loaded himself with shells – the adjutant in the lead – and rushed them to the guns. At point-blank range the battery did such execution that for the time being the enemy were driven back. Needless to say Capt. Gardiner has been recommended. Nothing daunted him. His readiness and cool daring at critical moments inspired others, of all ranks, with his own courage.

It is not given to all to have opportunity of showing what was in them, and though no deed is separately recorded of marked courage, the names of three officers stand out very clearly, and because of the very high character of their work: Major R.C. Cooper, Capt. John McMillan and Lieut O.T. Brothers (?).

Major Cooper, at the time of the battle, was captain of No. 1 Company, and was with the right of his Company and never left them all through the battle. At times, their position was very critical, and if it had not been for the coolness of the company commander neither he nor his men would have come out of the battle. It happened in this way: No. 3 Right Half Company was enveloped on three sides by the enemy. At the most critical moment a fog came down, and in the few moments that it lasted, Cooper led his men to safety. For some time he was out of touch with his supports, and was unable to communicate with his O.C., but wilfully and determinedly he fought his men until relief and reinforcements arrived. Only those who have fought through gas and form of shot and shell for almost

a week without intermission can understand the exhausting strain and need for that unbreakable spirit as clearly shown by Capt. Cooper at this time and again at Festubert and Givenchy.

An army can't fight unless it is fed, and undoubtedly the 1st B.C. R. owe a lot to the splendid work of the quartermaster and transport officer. Capt. J.C. MacMillan is a B.C. man, whose success as a pioneer of industry in British Columbia is too well known for me to dwell upon now. Lieut. O.T. Brothers (?) was known in South Africa, both during the Boer War and also to the newspaper world in South Africa, London and Vancouver. Both of these officers have been mentioned in dispatches for their gallant conduct and splendid work during the war, and in particular this battle.

Triumph of Transport

Never a day did our men go without rations. Through shot and shell – through poor bombarded Ypres, past "Suicide Corner," St. Jan, Wieltjhe and St. Julien, to Bombarde Cross-Roads," the transportation secured and took the rations for the battalion. Twice when the quartermasters and transport officers of other battalions had been unable to get to or to find their units, the quartermaster and transport officer of the 1st B.C.R. came to the help of other battalions and supplied their immediate needs. Though the road was constantly under shell fire and often a goodly rain of bullets, the 1st B.C.R. had to be fed. By the courage an efficiency, by this spirit that won't be beaten, they can claim a great victory over tremendous odds. That Ypres-Wieltjhe Road, with its gas shells, high explosive shells and shrapnel, with its constant stream of men and wagons, guns and limbers, horse and motor ambulances, slightly wounded and gassed men, here and there a dead horse, a broken wagon, a shell hole, or bricks and stones, partially blocking the road would daunt any but the bravest. It was bad by daylight; by night it was a hell.

Amongst the N.C.O.'s and men it is only possible to mention three here, but every one of them were heroes: Sgt. Pearless, Sgt. Dryden and Cpl. Mullins. Sgt Pearless, when the Germans threatened to envelop the remnants of the battalion, fought his machine gun as though he was giving an exhibition for a "cinne show," and did such execution that he held back the enemy and enabled the boys to retire. Sgt. Dryden displayed marked coolness and efficiency in bringing in Col. Hart-McHarg under heavy fire, and many other men under similar circumstances. Cpl. Mullins, of the bomb-throwers, showed great courage in driving the Germans out of a piece of trench. These three have been awarded the D.C.M.

At Festubert

With sad hearts at the loss of so many gallant comrades the battalion was set back into reserve to rest. Surely they had lived up to their motto, "Splendor Sine Occasu." After rest, re-equipment and reinforcement, they were transferred to Sir D. Haig's command, the 1st Army, and moved into the Festubert district. They moved into the trenches and fought beside the "Iron Division," the well-known 7th. an

On the way to the trenches the battalion passed the Guards coming out, and with them marched H.R.H. the Prince of Wales. He looked just as dirty as any officer who has done his bit in the trenches for the better part of a week. A hearty Canadian cheer would have greeted him had the fact that he was passing been known.

At Festubert two pieces of work were given to the 1st B.C. The first was apparently an ordinary piece of work. "Your battalion will occupy the reserve and support trenches," and they did so. Other battalions were ordered to charge. Other battalions had to repulse counter-attacks. The 1st B.C. had to sit tight in the bottom of the trench, and hour after hour were systematically shelled by an enemy

that had the range to a decimal point, and from any point of view the enemy did magnificent shooting, and our boys, with unflinching courage, paid the price in casualties.

The second piece of work was after their own heart – a charge with the 5th Battalion to take the redoubt K.5. Again the losses in men and officers was heavy, but they won the position assigned to them with gallantry. After this battle only two officers were left with the battalion who had been with them all the time and fought in the three actions as combatant officers, namely, Major Odlum and Capt. Cooper.

Lieut. W.D. Holmes did very gallant work in command of the "bombing party," when the 10th Battalion made a charge. When he heard the 10th coming he sprang up from the shelter to the top of the parapet, shouting at the top of his voice, "Charge, Canadians, charge!" and commenced throwing his bombs for all he was worth. The Germans broke and ran. He was wounded in several places, but hopes soon to be back with "the boys."

At La Bassee

Rest once more that seemed all too short, and off go the now famous 1st Canadian Division to the La Bassee district, the scene of constant hard fighting. Here again the 7th Battalion led the way into the new line of trenches. This is always a position of honor, and, with one exception through the war, this position has been held in the 2nd Infantry Brigade by the 1st B.C.R.

The trenches at Givenchy had been the scene of very hard fighting. Whilst the 1st Brigade held the line, they had to make a charge the night before the 2nd Brigade relieved them. The Germans were very angry and sore at their heavy losses, and so furnished a plentiful supply of "hate," i.e., shells – big and little – usually three times a day. The spirit of our boys was very clearly shown. They went to work filling sandbags and building up the parapets blown down by the shelling, and then when night fell Lieut. Brookes organized a work party to bring in the bodies of comrades who had fallen in the charge. The German trenches at this section were only from 40 to 80 yards away from our lines. Not five minutes went by without a flare light going up, when every one of the work party had to fall flat on the ground until the light went out. They succeeded in bringing in fifty-two bodies. Lieut. Owen, son of the Rev. C.C. Owen, very bravely went out and succeeded in bringing in a wounded Canadian, who, poor chap, had been lying out for 48 hours.

A very sad casualty marked the conclusion of this terribly trying and brave night's work. Lieut. R. F. E. Buscombe, who had commanded the work party that had prepared the graves, was standing by as the last word of the service was being said, when he was shot through the heart by a sniper. A brave task completed, and with the words of prayer on his lips, he was summoned to the presence of his Heavenly Father. Lieuts. Brookes and Owen have been recommended for their gallant work that night. Sgt. Fyles and Ptes, McQueen and Hall have been recommended for bravery with this working party. Nothing is more trying to brave men than this call, to lay their comrades to rest.

Heroes All

Now the war-worn warriors are once more back at the scene of their first experiences – "Plug Street." It looks better in green Summer clothing, with wonderful crops nearly ripe. The spirit, the same as of yore, is with them still. They are here to see it through. They are fighting for wife, mother, sweetheart, sister, their country, their king and their God.

Heroes every one of them. Through wet and cold they have stood on guard. Though 'crumbs" are in their clothes and blisters on their toes, they still say, "Are we downhearted? No, No, No!"

History is being made, and in days to come Canada, with the record of her sons writ large, will lift up her hands to the Great, Good God in thanksgiving for the hero sons who gave themselves that she might be saved from the hand of the enemy and worse than death.

Typed by Gillian Klassen
November 2019